

## South Mtn. Freeway costs soar

by **Kerry Fehr-Snyder** - Sept. 26, 2008 05:45 PM  
 The Arizona Republic

The price of the proposed South Mountain Freeway has soared in the past two years, eclipsing its budget for the next decade at least.

What was once billed as a \$1.7 billion freeway to complete the Loop 202 through Ahwatukee Foothills and Laveen has mushroomed to \$2.4 billion. And that doesn't include the cost of the whole project, which initially would be built as a six-lane, 22-mile freeway with room to expand to 10 lanes.

The new estimates were discussed Thursday at the monthly meeting of the South Mountain Citizens Advisory Team.

"I find it amazing that we've been talking about a 10-lane facility but we have an estimate for a six-lane freeway," said Brian Smith, a CAT member who represents the Calabrea HOA in Ahwatukee Foothills.

But officials with the Arizona Department of Transportation said that the real cost of building the freeway comes at the beginning with acquiring rights of way, excavating dirt, buying construction materials and covering

labor costs.

Those costs rose about 50 percent since April 6, 2006, said Mike Bruder, project manager for the South Mountain Freeway.

Nationally, construction materials account for the largest increase on freeway projects over the past year: 85 percent for diesel, 53 percent for asphalt and 30 percent for steel.

In Arizona, the costs for freeway construction have risen primarily due to an increase in money set aside for litigation and other expenses as part of ADOT's right-of-way estimate. The new estimate is \$930.6 million, an increase of nearly \$294 million.

The Regional Transportation Plan has set aside \$900 million over the next five years for the South Mountain Freeway. It has allocated another \$200 million for the project in the five years after that.

Taxpayers already have spent \$106.7 million on the project, primarily to build the interchange between the Santan Freeway-Loop 202 and Interstate 10 as it leads onto Pecos Road, the most likely route for the South Mountain Freeway.

ADOT and the Federal Highway Administration will issue a record of decision on building the freeway, perhaps as early as next year. The Maricopa Association of

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Governments ultimately will decide whether to fund it.

Bruder said if the freeway is approved, ADOT engineers will need 24 months to design and engineer it. That would be followed by four years of construction in the first phase.

With a new price tag of \$2.4 billion, the state is looking at a \$1.1 billion funding shortfall.

Bruder said if a decision is made to build the freeway, ADOT may need to scale back the project.

"Or ultimately, we delete it and don't build it," he said, prompting a quiet "yay" from CAT members opposed to the project.

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